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Ireland

North and South keeping Covid-19 policy cards close to chest

Despite idea of full co-operation, Foster and O'Neill claim Varadkar leaving them in dark

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While chief medical officer Tony Holohan is seen as co-operating well with the North, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar is accused of not sharing information in advance. Photograph: Dave Meehan

Gerry Moriarty

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In Northern Ireland, some politicians and officials are finding it difficult to "decode" what is Taoiseach Leo Varadkar's – and indeed the Irish Government's – attitude to North-South co-operation over coronavirus.

There is a Covid-19 memorandum of understanding between the Government and Northern Executive while politicians on both sides of the Border have talked about the great co-operation between the chief

medical officers, doctors Tony Holohan and Michael McBride and between the Minister for Health Simon Harris and Robin Swann.


Yet, at two key moments during this crisis, the Northern Executive complained that it was left largely in the dark over Dublin's big plans for dealing with coronavirus.

Covid-19 in Ireland


New cases	Total cases
1571	340,280

Source: Department of Health • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Coronavirus Data Dashboard



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On March 12th, when Mr Varadkar in Washington announced the beginning of the lockdown in the Republic, the Executive, as First Minister Arlene Foster said at the time, was not given a proper advance briefing.

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“We were just made aware, I think, about 10 minutes before the statement was made by the Taoiseach,” she said. “We did not know what the content of that statement was going to be. And I think that is disappointing that it is the case but, however, he made his decision and he has to carry through with that.”

With such a curt and rather hurt response, there was a reasonable expectation that when the next important announcement came on Friday, May 1st, about the easing of the lockdown that Ms Foster, Deputy First Minister Michelle O’Neill and other Ministers would have been notified in advance.

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But, again, no briefing. The Monday after the announcement Ms Foster said the Executive was not given advance sight of the plan.

This has caused considerable puzzlement and some annoyance in Northern Ireland.

Unfortunate comments

Matters were not helped by what many nationalist politicians saw as very unfortunate comments by the Taoiseach about Fine Gael having "overseas members" in Belfast.

Some umbrage also was taken by Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection Regina Doherty saying that the "most important task . . . was to tell Irish people" about the roadmap out of Covid.

Mr Varadkar apologised for his “overseas” comments in Monday’s Irish News but could not resist taking a swipe at Sinn Féin by adding, “In the interests of goodwill all round, I do hope Sinn Féin figures stop referring to the State as the ‘South of Ireland’, ‘Free State’ or the ‘Southern State’.”

In the same newspaper Ms O’Neill wondered was Mr Varadkar being “opportunistic” and was all this related to the Taoiseach’s attempt to form a government “to the exclusion of Sinn Féin”.

A senior political source said the feeling at Stormont was that whatever about the "overseas" gaffe that the failure to apprise the Executive of both the lockdown and the five-stage relaxation of the rules appeared to be calculated – but to what purpose, he just could not fully figure.

“It is grand that the chief medical officers are working together but there does not seem to be a political alignment,” he said.

The same non-Sinn Féin source, like Ms O’Neill, wondered was it part of some tactic to try to make life difficult for Sinn Féin.

‘Hard to decode’

“It is straining relationships and it puts nationalists in a difficult position because we are trying to make the argument that we should be aligning more closely with what the South is doing, and they just keep taking the ball and walking away with it,” he said. “It is really hard to decode, we just can’t detect what is motivating it.”

Ostensibly, relationships between Dublin Ministers and Stormont colleagues appear good, while Dublin sources repeatedly insist that strong co-operation exists.

However, some in Stormont believe that Mr Varadkar fears that information shared in advance with Stormont would be exploited quickly by Sinn Féin leader Mary Lou McDonald “before Leo stands up to speak”.

But, in the same breath, one source who believes that contradicted himself by saying that Dublin surely briefs Opposition leaders in Dublin ahead of significant news. Perhaps, it is more cock-up than conspiracy, he suggested.

However, information can travel two ways – or not. Ms Foster and Ms O'Neill will present their own five-stage roadmap to the Stormont Assembly on Tuesday afternoon.

However, the detail of the changes that will be made to the lockdown restrictions are not going to be shared ahead of time with Government Buildings in Dublin, or No 10 Downing Street.

“It is the intention of the Executive to bring its recovery plan before the Assembly tomorrow ahead of sharing it with both governments,” said a spokesperson for the Executive.

Which sounded suspiciously like the Executive saying, “Well, if you won’t share your information, we won’t share ours”, or in layman’s terms “what’s sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander”.



[Gerry Moriarty](#)

Gerry Moriarty is the former Northern editor of The Irish Times



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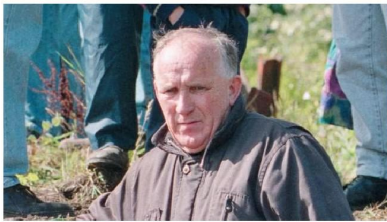
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